

# Self-study notes

## Unit No. 2 Pre-care and post-care experiences

### Unit objectives

- To learn about the experiences of children before they enter the looked after system
- To learn about outcomes for looked after children
- To consider what factors affect the outcomes for looked after children

### Outline of Unit

Life experiences of looked after children

### Introduction

Welcome to the unit on the pre and post care experiences of looked after children. The purpose of this very brief unit is to expand on the introductory unit by highlighting the difficult life experiences of many children before they enter the looked after system and the poor life outcomes experienced by many of them.

### Post-care experiences

Look at slides 1-4. These outline the very bleak picture painted by research of the outcomes for looked after children. It is important to remember that although the statistics are very worrying, they do not mean that all looked after children will do badly when they leave care. Many young people leave the looked after system as responsible, productive and happy young people and have benefited from their time being looked after. But for a significant number of looked after children, the transitions to adulthood is very difficult, and for some this develops into problems which have an impact throughout their lives. Spend a few minutes reflecting on this and write down what you think the reasons are for these poor outcomes.

You may have identified a number of reasons for looked after children having such poor outcomes. You may have focused on the failures of the system, poor practice in children's homes, foster home breakdowns, lack of stability, poor educational support or a range of other experiences that may occur while children are being looked after. Alternatively, you might have thought more about the experiences that children had before they became looked after and the long term effects these might have had. Whatever the balance of your views, it is important to acknowledge that the public perception is that these poor outcomes are **caused** by the experience of being looked after. This view is shared by many professionals and can lead to strenuous attempts to keep

children with their own families beyond the point that is appropriate. The reality is that the group of children who have the worst educational attainments are those looked after at home.

### **Pre-care experiences**

Now look at the remaining slides which focus on the experiences that children have had prior to coming into care. We must be clear that all looked after children have different and individual early experiences and life outcomes. The statistics are helpful to understand patterns but each child should be understood within their own history, strengths and aspirations. The number of very young children becoming looked after is increasing and most children who enter the system do so as a result of family difficulties rather than their own behaviour. A child may have only a very brief experience of being looked after or spend most of their childhood being cared for away from their birth family. In both cases they could be included in outcome statistics but the amount of influence that the care experience would have on the child's future is very different. Many care leavers have not spent a substantial part of their childhood and adolescence being looked after and it can be very difficult to completely change entrenched patterns of behaviour and attitudes. Some children who are looked after away from home also experience several attempts to return them to their families which can increase the instability and insecurity they have to deal with. All these factors impinge on the long term outcomes for looked after children. Negative outcomes are not just the result of an inadequate experience of care. Indeed, in many cases the care experience will have prevented worse outcomes, and may have helped secure better outcomes than might have been possible if no action had been taken. This unit highlights the fact that any attempt at understanding poor outcomes for looked after children must take into account their adverse experiences prior to becoming looked after. Some of these themes will be revisited in the later units "Transitions and Trajectories" and "Leaving Care Well".

It is right to acknowledge that the system itself can put substantial barriers in the way of children's achievement. Some children clearly tell us that issues linked to difficulties in their family life were made worse by their time in care. What can be done to improve outcomes for the whole population of looked after children, as well as strategies for working with individual children will be explored in later units. It is true, however, that most of the problems children experience while they are looked after are as a result of systemic failure rather than lack of care or concern from individual adults. On the whole many young people speak very warmly and appreciatively of their relationships with carers.

The extract from the article by Donald Forrester emphasises that the message of this unit is confirmed through what research is available.